SAN FRANCISCO'S LOST BOHEMIA

IN ALL the horror of the catastrophe that has overwhelmed San Francisco, there be many who without belittling the greater importance of the calamity in its general humanitarian aspect are yet ready to drop a tear for "Frisco's lost Bohemia." And well they may, for it is the only town in the country that had a real Bohemia, which had grown spontaneously with its growth, and was a natural integral part of the city's life rather than an artificial graft, carefully cultivated, as it is in most of our large cities.

The real Bohemianism of San Francisco has centered around its restaurants, and its restaurants are famous. The city is known to the globe trotter as a very metropolis of restaurants. In fact there is an impression current that San Franciscans spend all their time at their restaurants and theaters. As a matter of fact they are enthusiastic diners out. They have, of course, their big handsome restaurants, much glass and glitter, and fine linen, and high prices, very similar to and every bit as good as the high priced restaurants of other cities in the United States and Europe. That type of restaurant is the same the world over.

But it is not such as these that are centers of that Bohemia for which San Francisco has always been famous. San Francisco was born in 1848 when one Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's Fort on the north fork of the American River. Bohemia was born in San Francisco about the same time and has grown with its growth. It is of the very fiber of the conditions which produced San Francisco. The semi-tropical life, the cosmopolitan population, the absence of home life in the beginning of its history all combined to make San Franciscans the enthusiastic diners out that they are, and to give to the city of the Golden Gate a diversity and an individuality in its public places of refreshment not to be equaled anywhere else in the world.

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The Lesser Bohemia

The cheap restaurant, which will give a full French dinner, well cooked and reasonably well served, with good table claret—not the "red ink" of similar restaurants in New York—including all for 50 cents, is its successful specialty. There are hundreds of these scattered all over the town, and each of them, as soon as it has achieved a reputation as being a little better than its neighbors, as serving one thing particularly well, or even as having a particularly genial and sympathetic host, has become a center of literary and artistic good-fellowship, a rendezvous for clever but impecunious, men and women, who found there a place to be absolutely at ease, to laugh and forget the world, a little center of a most delightful Bohemianism.

Most famous of all these is—or, rather, was, though it is hard to realize that it has been wiped off the map—"Matias'," at 525 Broadway. Everybody called it "Matias'," quite forgetting that the genial, witty, handsome Mexican who ran it had another name. He figures in the city directory and the voting lists as Matias Mortigia, but surnames are an unimportant detail in Bohemia.

Matias ran about the coziest and most delightful little eating house one might hope to meet in a trip around the world, a genuine Mexican restaurant, not an imitation. The meals were cooked by Mexican women in approved Mexican fashion right before your eyes. Great strings of red peppers hung drying from the low ceiling. The walls were papered in the gay colors in which the Mexican taste revels. The tables were small, the linen coarse, but spotless, and queer shaped gourds took the place of water bottles. The meals are—were, alas!—the perfection of Mexican cookery. Matias served a luncheon in five courses, beginning with a vegetable soup hot enough to serve as a foretaste of purgatory, accompanied by a bottle of strong Mexican claret, which made the unwary long for whisky as a soft drink, and coffee which Paris itself could not have surpassed and which no mere Anglo-Saxon could hope to equal, all for 25 cents. His dinner was a more elaborate function—the price thereof 50 cents.

The restaurant was originally established to cater to the large Mexican population of San Francisco's Latin quarter. It became exceedingly popular among the artists who brought their friends, and they in turn their friends, until one is—was—likely to find these representatives of all the arts and learned professions. Fortunately Matias did not allow success to turn his head. He preserved to the end the distinctive features of the place, whose spirit was fully expressed by Alice Meynell, the famous English essayist, when she wrote in the visitor's book which Mortigia kept, "At ease in mine inn."

For years "Matias'" has been a sort of literary shrine, primarily because Robert Louis Stevenson frequented it in the days of his poverty. Since then so many famous people have dined there, that the aforementioned visitor's book—a cross between a hotel register and an autograph album, has become in itself an objective for literary and artistic pilgrimages. Most of his visitors wrote in this book of Mortigia's and looking over it, while one found much that was trite, banal, commonplace, there was scarcely a page without its striking sketch, its telling phrase.

Another of the more famous of San Francisco's humbler restaurants was Luchetti's, on Davis street. It had not the alluring cosiness of Matias'. It was a big straggling barn like place, uncomfortable and inartistic, ornamented by bright colored lithographs advertising certain cigarettes, cigars or liquors. But it was the chief restaurant of the Italian quarter, and as such much affected by the literary and artistic set in search of the color of life. It was in the heart of the fisherman's district, and early in the day deserted, except by a stray surly son of Italy, whose surliness be it explained in all fairness, was of the type that may be ascribed to the cold, gray dawn of the morning after.

At noon the fishermen came in to take their lunch before launching their felucca sailed craft that added so much to the picturesqueness of the bay. Sturdy fellows they are, deep chested and strongly built, representing the entire Italian seaboard from Venice and Genoa to Sicily—a very different type from the "Dago" laborer or fruit vender with whom our Eastern cities are familiar. In the main they were quiet and peaceable enough, but occasionally the hot Italian blood was stirred by the strong Italian wine which accompanied every meal, and the snatches of sea-going song gave place to the vociferous shrillness of an Italian quarrel, and knives flashed until the bluecoats had to take a hand.

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Sunday Night at Luchetti's

After their meal one after the other they filed up to the bar to have their demijohns filled with "Dago red," the rough beady claret which they affect. For they do not go to sea without their wine jars well filled. Then they sally forth in their bright colored jerseys and gum boots to their thighs, gallant, reckless, swaggering, picturesque fellows, whom the artistic fraternity loves and mingles with in that easy good fellowship and equality which is of the essence of Bohemianism.

Sunday night Luchetti's was in its glory, quite as Bohemian, but in a very different way. It was given over to young American men and maidens who partook appreciatively of the 50-cent dinner served there. This was a mere travesty on a good Italian dinner, but the young people not knowing the real article were satisfied. In the course of the evening the fun was likely to become pretty noisy, but harmless. There was singing and perhaps dancing on the part of the patrons of the establishment, if the spirit moved. But there was almost no drunkenness, and the boisterousness was merely the natural expression of high animal spirits. The Sunday night crowd was made up of boys and girls of the middle class, often fresh from Sunday trips into the surrounding country, coming in loaded with wild flowers, so that in the spring the place was glorious with the color of the yellow poppies.

Introductions here, or at Sauguinetti's next door were unnecessary. The fact that people were fellow-diners there made them for the moment acquainted. It was a common saying that though you might take a girl into one of these restaurants it did not at all follow that you would take one out—at least, not the same girl. Sauguinetti's, which was next door to Luchetti's, had been the latter's predecessor as the great Italian restaurant of the quarter. It was smaller, but more attractive artistically, a low room with beamed ceiling and dark walls. It has not of late been much frequented by Americans, and consequently has been more distinctively Italian, and thereby so much the more attractive to the Bohemian element.

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Kissed All Ten Girls

Many tales are told of the doings at San Guinette's, when it was in its prime, doing pathetic and whimsical, suggestive of some of Stevenson's "New Arabian Nights" tales. They tell of one big fellow, tall, broad, and strong as a young Hercules, who came in there one night when the restaurant was crowded, and passing down the line, kissed all the girls. There was nothing rude or boisterous in his manner. It was courteous, ceremonial, almost solemn. He bowed low before each and bestowed his caresses with all the air of a prince of the blood. But there was one girl who didn't want to be kissed—a mere slip of a girl, not more than nineteen. She stood up and looked him full in the eye. Checked and bewildered the man hesitated, then bowing low, offered his hand, which was readily accepted. Then bowing once more he left the room. None of the girls had resented the kiss, none of their escorts had dreamed of resenting it for them. All had laughed, and accepted it in good part, according with the spirit of the place and of the gathering.

These are only one or two of hundreds of such places in which artistic and literary bohemians have been wont to gather, where the spirit of good fellowship prevailed, and where "carpe diem" might have expressed the prevailing spirit. In them men and women met, and in the joy of companionship laughed at fate and poverty. In them the most popular toast was always "Drink to now!"

And last, but by no means least, there was the Bohemian Club, "Frisco's Bohemian Club," famous the world over. It was organized in 1872 at the instigation of three newspaper men, Joseph N. H. Irwin, at that time commercial editor of the Examiner, Sands W. Forman, city editor of the Examiner, and Thomas Newcomb, city editor of the Call. From small beginnings it grew, and grew, until it became one of the most prosperous and famous clubs in the world. It has recently been occupying fine quarters on Post street, and these went up in smoke in the general conflagration which followed the earthquake. The club attendants succeeded, however, in saving many of the fine pictures that adorned the walls, by cutting them from their frames. They also saved considerable of the club property. It is to be noted that in the avalanche of benefits for the San Francisco sufferers that are being given all over the country, Richard Mansfield announces one for the San Francisco Bohemian Club.

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The Bohemian Club of Today

The Bohemians of the small restaurants are wont to complain rather bitterly that the Bohemian Club has lost much of its original character; that it is in short no longer Bohemian. They say it has taken in a lot of millionaires, because, forsooth, it needed the money; and that the millionaires have made it a dress suit affair; and tell tearfully how they objected to Jack London's coming around in negligee clothes—"and they call themselves Bohemians!" Nevertheless, the fact remains, that it is an honor to be a member of the Bohemian Club, the privilege implying fellowship with the noted men whose names have figured on its roll in the thirty-five years of its existence.

And however much the truly Bohemian element may sneer at the club during the greater part of the year, even they admit that during the club's outing, its annual "Jinks"—"High Jinks, Low Jinks, and the Burial of Dull Care"—it reverts to its original Bohemian character. This function takes place always in August in a grove of redwoods at Gurneyville, owned by the club. And the mere fact that the club does own it redounds everlastingly to its credit. For the club saved it from a railroad. The railroad was after it with an ax; the club was after it with a little money, and a lot of sentiment. It strained its resources, but it saved the grove, and has enjoyed it ever since.

Once a year it goes there for its "Jinks" at the time of the August full moon and takes its guests, and lives in tents under its redwoods. There are two sorts of redwoods, the gigantic sequoia, and the other sort. These are the other sort—not supposed to be gigantic, but the skyscrappers of Wall and Broad streets and lower Broadway would nestle comfortably in their shade. As to just what the "Jinks" are—is—here is what Gouverneur Morris says of it in Outing:

"High Jinks is not what it sounds. You don't know what it is until you have seen it. For weeks beforehand each person you meet says: 'Are you going to the Jinks?' Wives and virgins ask it snippily; they are not allowed to attend. It is like most truly artistic incidents, a stag affair. I admit that it sounds like a lot of men turned loose with a lot of champagne. And as a matter of fact there were lots of men, perhaps 500, and there was a lot of champagne (very good champagne, too) and there was anything else you wanted to drink, and plenty of brilliant men to drink it with. But the Jinks is not a Long Island clambake. Your Californian's belly is as empty as the next man's and he likes to fill it with good things; but he has other emptiness, and in this he differs from the average run of his countrymen. He has the soul of an artist and once a year he goes to his grove under the full moon and fills that soul with the majesty of rich color and strong music. The High Jinks is as serious as a funeral. It is—or it was last year—a musical play delivered elaborately in the open air at midnight, before the quietest and most appreciative audience I have ever seen."

Undoubtedly the Bohemian Club will be rebuilt, and will continue to have its High Jinks under the August moon. But that lesser Bohemia that gathered in San Francisco's notable "humbler restaurants" and not only filled its empty belly, but satisfied those other emptinesses whereof Mr. Morris speaks—will it survive the fire—or will "Frisco's lost Bohemia" remain irreparably lost?

SPRING OUTING ONLY A SURVIVAL

GERMAN scientists, who delight to lose themselves in the realms of mystic speculation; also wise men of other nationalities, who think anything is good provided you can't prove it, tell us that belief in ghosts, omens, signs, dreams, and anything else that one is unable to pin down and look at, are simply attenuated streaks of what our ancestors held as solid facts. These ancient gentry were firmly convinced of the existence of a great many spirits, good, bad and indifferent, each one of whom had his own particular duty to perform and attended strictly to those affairs which were allotted to him.

Whether old Troglodyte killed a deer or fell over a cliff, he knew that it was none of his own doings, but that the spirit who was allotted to him for that special purpose was at the bottom of the whole matter. This is the earliest application of the principle of division of labor.

These gentlemen have also decided that the games of childhood are modified forms of what were once serious occupations; the human race does not need to keep them up, neither does it know how to let them drop into innocuous desuetude. As said before, the connection between a belief in a lot of spirits thousands of years ago and a game of marbles at the present day is not as plain as might be wished; but, accepting it as a fact, we find in it an explanation of two freakish proclivities which cannot be rationally accounted for.

When, according to the almanac, "Sun enters Aries, spring begins," some men act as if Aries was after them. They band themselves together, after much talk and running to and fro; hie away to some remote locality, with fishing outfit enough to clean out the ocean; come home finally with bad colds and sunburnt noses, and tell lies for a month about what a good time they had and how many fish they caught.

The vague impulse that leads to this erratic behavior (adopting, of course, the dicta of the scientific men) is a mental inheritance that has come straight down from the time when our forefathers lived in holes in the ground. "Spring cleaning" in those days meant something. The debris that had been accumulating on the cavern floor all winter got to be "just something awful." He began to feel that there is no place like away from home. This feeling was intensified when the women began "reddin'-up things." He wanted to go somewhere; his soul was filled with a wild yearning for the streams and the forest, blue sky and singing birds. Even as the ground hog comes forth to look at the sky, so did he; and it looked good. The air, too, was an improvement on the domestic atmosphere.

But old fashions have passed away in some respects; commercial enterprise frowns upon him who makes no show of being employed. So the fugitive seeks a quiet, secluded spot where he can lie down and take things easy and think up the other kind of lie to tell later. Meantime, he makes a bluff at being busy by watching a fishing pole; the only implement, tool, instrument, utensil, or whatever you choose to call it, that will allow a man to be absolutely lazy and yet have an air of being industriously occupied.

A like association of ancient and modern ideas will account for the annual "fall hunt." When old Troglodyte started out to lay in his winter meat it was perfectly apparent to the esculent feral beasts and birds that there would soon be something doing, and they lit out for the deep-tangled wildwood, so that he sometimes had to be away from home for a month.

So it is probable that man would have lost his hunting and fishing instinct if woman had ever been able to forget that she had to clean house. Woman, of course, would never think of allowing man to have two instinct survivals while she retained only one; here is one respect in which she is bound to pull even. For untold centuries woman had to get out as soon as spring opened and put in the crop. It was part of her business; it is in her system and she can't get it out.